

Luke 17:1-10 AM

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[0:00] Father, may the riches of your grace shine through the poverty of my words, so that the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts may be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Maker and our Redeemer. Amen.

You may be seated. And if you could join me, Luke chapter 17, this is on page 876 of the Hugh Bibles. The sermon is going to be structured very simply around three words.

Forgiveness, faith, and faithfulness. At first glance, when you look at the teachings of Jesus in this passage, it feels like just three distinct things that Luke has randomly strung together, almost like various items of clothing hung on a clothing line out to dry.

They're there next to each other, but it's hard to understand why they're next to each other. But as we take a closer look, I think we discern something deeper. Right away in verse 1, we're told that Jesus is speaking specifically to his disciples in this instance.

The last few chapters, Jesus has been going back and forth between the Pharisees, his disciples, the Pharisees, his disciples. He wants both to learn what it means to enter his kingdom. Here, it's for Christians.

[1:22] It's for the disciples. It's for those that have said, yes, I want to enter through that narrow door into the vast feast of Jesus' kingdom. And Jesus specifically speaks to followers of Jesus here, disciples, who are trying to do life with other followers of Jesus.

So, if I were to give this a sermon title, it would be something like Church Membership 101. Every member of the church needs Jesus to teach them about three things, forgiveness, faith, and faithfulness.

And Jesus gets straight to the heart of the issue and just says, let's go for forgiveness of sins. This is 1 through 4. Look at verse 1 with me. Jesus says to his disciples, temptations to sin, we'll come back to that word, are sure to come.

But woe to the one through whom they come. It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.

Notice Jesus' fierce protection, like a parent protecting his little children. Pay attention to yourselves, verse 3, Jesus says. If your brother or sister sins, rebuke him.

[2:34] And if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times saying, I repent, you must forgive him. So, right out of the gate, the first lesson of Jesus' Church Membership 101 course is there is no perfect church this side of heaven and forgiveness will be required.

You're going to enter into a community where people are going to tempt you to sin, where you may tempt some other people to sin, and where some people are probably going to sin against you at some point. And the glue that is going to need to hold the church community together is going to need to be the gospel of forgiveness lived in the practical day in, day out of personal relationships. And anybody that's been a part of the church for more than two to three minutes knows this is true. And we're kidding ourselves if we think otherwise. Isn't this such an interesting place for Jesus to begin?

I mean, I would have thought of a lot of other cooler places to go. But Jesus says temptations of sin are not just may come or are likely to come. He says they're sure to come. I mean, imagine if Chris, for example, you're a newcomer to St. John's and you go to the Introducing St. John's course and Chris warmly welcomes you with chocolate croissants and tea.

It's great. You sit down with excitement. What is this community all about? And Chris begins his presentation and says, the first thing you need to know is that if you're going to join St. John's,

you're going to join a community that tends to sin against each other.

[4 : 04] It's not a perfect community. And so you're going to have to learn forgiveness if you want to be a part of our community. It'd be an interesting church growth strategy. See, the word for sin that Jesus uses twice here in the first two verses is not necessarily the normal word that you get for sin.

It means stumbling block, literally something that trips you up. So you're walking through the front door and you don't realize that the door jam is four inches higher than the step and you trip over it. It's something that causes you or is the occasion of you sinning. It's something that gets in the way of your faith in Jesus. And Jesus is saying that your experience of the church as a Christian is going to be fraught and complicated and messy.

There will be things that foster your faith, that nourish your faith, that establish your faith, that root and ground your faith. But there will also be things that threaten to shipwreck it. And Jesus says, I don't want you to be naive.

My church, this side of heaven, certainly isn't perfect. There is an essential fallibility to the church. And I just want to pause here for a moment because I think this is actually a really timely word for many Christians in this generation.

[5 : 19] I think most specifically in my generation and younger. There are a lot who, having grown up in the church, are now giving up on the church. They're disillusioned by what they have seen and what they have heard, what they have experienced in the church.

The church that I was serving in Southern California developed this nickname. It was called the Church of the Last Resort. Such an interesting nickname. All these people would be coming through our doors and they'd be like, I'm about this close from giving up on the whole thing.

They said, The greed I've seen, the racism I've seen, the political alliances I've seen, the sexual hypocrisy I've seen, the power abuse I've seen. This looks nothing like Jesus.

I don't want to be a part of this anymore. They're about this far away from giving up. And they said, This is my last go at church. I don't know why. It just droves of people. It's what sociologists are calling these days, the de-churched.

And it's an increasing group of people. And this isn't just some group of people out there. Like, there's probably a lot of us here in this congregation who are struggling with this right now.

Wondering if we can stay.

[6 : 27] Wondering if we can continue. And there's probably many of us who have sons and daughters and brothers and sisters and friends and neighbors who have maybe lost their faith or they are stumbling. They're tripping up.

They're struggling to continue in their faith in Jesus because of what they have seen in the church. And on the one hand, Jesus just warns people straight up.

And I love this about Jesus. He's so realistic about what it means to follow him with the people of God. As he says, Just don't have unrealistic expectations. Temptations to sin are sure to come.

Don't be surprised. I never promised that my church was going to be perfect this side of heaven. It's interesting. Some people say when they're joining a church, you know, they're kind of looking for all these things.

And we often, I like to tell them, you know, if you find the perfect church, you may not want to join it because you might ruin it. When we get together, we bring things to one another and we affect each other in beautiful ways.

[7 : 27] But there are also temptations to sin in that. So Jesus doesn't want us to have unrealistic expectations. But on the other hand, Jesus doesn't let people off the hook. Notice how Jesus does that. He says in verse 2, Woe, but woe to you.

Woe to the one who is the source of this temptation and stumbling in my church and my body.

Verse 2 is a word of warning. Jesus is saying, You should expect this to happen, but if you are the one through whom another believer stumbles in their faith, then that is a very serious thing indeed. And Jesus uses imagery that is incredibly graphic. A millstone that would have been a large stone that was used to grind flour, tied around your neck, dragging you to the bottom of the ocean floor. Jesus uses this image of a violent and extreme and certain death. And it's hyperbolic language to make a powerful point that we should pay attention to our impact on others.

Jesus takes it very seriously. Growing up with my mother, I had this wonderful Italian mother, very expressive, very loving.

[8 : 42] Whenever she disciplined us, it was always very measured. So if you do this, this is going to happen. I'm giving you a warning. If you do this again, this is going to happen. All very measured, right?

Except if my brother and sister and I ever offended against one another. she would roar like a lion. Like the fiercest and most intense aspect of my mother would come out if we ever hurt each other. And there was something that she was communicating in that. She was saying, the way that you treat one another matters more to me than a lot of other things.

And Jesus, I think, is getting a similar point here. It is a parent who cares so deeply about his children that he's fiercely protective and says, pay attention to yourselves in verse 3.

Pay attention to your impact on others, your thoughts, your words, your deeds, your life. Be alert to the impact that you have. Because this isn't just a me and Jesus journey that you're on.

[9 : 44] We are all in this together and the way that we live and act and think affects one another. Now, this raises an obvious question for me, though, with Jesus. It's like, Jesus, what are those specific things that you want me to look out for in my life?

And in verses 3 and 4, I think he digs in deeper. He says, if your brother sins against you, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. Notice how the two things, the only two things that Jesus wants us, warns against, wants us to pay attention to, both interestingly have to do with how I respond to my brother or sister's sins in the church.

How do I respond when my brother is stuck in sin, and how do I respond when my sister repents of sin? I think Jesus is getting at two temptations that can happen in the church, that on the one hand we can resort to complacency, or on the other hand we can resort to resentment.

On the one hand, allowing your brother or sister in Christ to grow complacent in their sin by not rebuking them. It's a word that means honestly warning someone of the direction that they are heading.

On the other hand, allowing your brother or sister in Christ to be discouraged by their sin by not forgiving them. It's a word that means releasing somebody from their moral indebtedness to you, not holding their sins against them anymore, freeing them up for newness of life.

[11 : 13] So you see what Jesus is saying? I think he's saying in verses 1 and 2, woe to the one through whom temptations to sin come. And then I think in verses 3 and 4 he's actually getting close.

Like what are the ways that we can actually be a temptation to sin in the others? It's if we do not warn somebody of the sin that they are continuing in and we allow them to grow complacent in their sin, that will actually become a stumbling block for them in their faith in Jesus.

On the other hand, if somebody repents of their sins to us and we choose to hold on to it, we're not going to forgive them, we're not going to release them, we are not going to offer the forgiveness that Christ wants for them in the gospel, then they may grow discouraged in their sin.

Forgiveness is so important to the life of the church that Jesus doubles down in verse 4. He says, if someone sins against you seven times in one day, and notice how he adds the additional details to make the point more forcefully.

It's personal, it's against you. It's persistent and repeated seven times. And it's intense. This happens all in a single day. So Jesus is not depicting forgiveness as this trite, easy, transactional thing.

[12 : 30] It's just easy to dish out forgiveness to people. He is expecting that it is going to be a demanding daily practice. It's going to be something that requires work and costly self-sacrifice, an ongoing way of life that is going to require full divine assistance.

According to Jesus, you must forgive when somebody repents of their sin. It's not a choice. It's interesting, in the Greek, the word must is not actually there.

But Jesus uses very strong language. It would probably be better translated, you will forgive. In other words, it's not a request or a command. Jesus is just stating it as an assumed reality.

This is what my disciples will do when they find themselves in this situation. They will forgive. And Jesus states it so strongly that the disciples have almost a crisis of faith.

This takes us to our second point. In verse 5, the apostles say to the Lord, Lord, increase our faith. And the Lord says to them, if you had faith like the grain of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would obey you.

[13 : 46] Notice what's happening here. There's a request for an increase of faith. And I think that is directly related to what Jesus just said in verse 4. And it's related to the difficulty that the disciples are experiencing in thinking about living out Jesus' teaching on forgiveness.

They're saying, oh, now this is beyond my capacity. And so they cry out, Lord, increase our faith.

And I think there's a really key lesson for us here. A key lesson for us actually hearing the good news of Jesus in this passage is that the ability to forgive is a matter of faith.

The ability to forgive does not come from my own internal resources or my feelings about a person. The ability to forgive comes from God.

It is a matter of trusting God who judges and forgives all our sins. And this is really important because forgiveness, where there has been true injury, true hurt, true offense, is one of the most costly things.

It feels much easier to sit as judge over somebody and hold on to the ways that they've sinned against you. It puts you in a position of continued control over them.

[15 : 03] But if they repent to release them, that is truly a costly thing. And I think Jesus is saying that our faith is going to be tested in moments in life where it's really difficult for us to release someone from their sins.

But where our faith is tested, it has opportunity to grow. The question is, will we ignore or will we hold on? If we ignore the sins of another, it leads to complacency and if we hold on, it leads to resentment and discouragement.

So the imagery, the main point of the imagery that Jesus uses, I think in verse 6, this mustard seed and mulberry trees is meant to be a word of encouragement. So I don't think Jesus here is actually reprimanding his disciples by saying, oh, you of little faith.

If you just had enough faith, you would be able to actually forgive in this instance. I think Jesus is realizing that what he is requiring of his disciples is something so demanding that it's almost beyond their capacity.

Uprooting a mulberry tree, a mulberry tree in the ancient world would have been something that had a widespread and deep root system. So trees could live on for centuries because they could weather storms and never get blown over.

[16 : 18] And so the image here is of actually something that is incredibly difficult, uprooting a mulberry tree. It's facing something in life that feels insurmountable and impossible.

And Jesus is pointing to a mustard seed and he says, just the smallest of faith in me has the power to bring about great obedience in the face of great difficulty. Now I think we need to be really careful and clear here.

Jesus is not saying if you just had enough faith you could ask whatever you want and you would get it. Get it. Kind of like a name it and claim it thing. Jesus, I think, is saying, by faith in me, even if it is very, very, very minuscule, you can live in obedience to my teaching.

Faith is the font and fuel of obedience in the Christian life. And the Lord himself is the font and fuel for faith in the Christian.

So I think this is actually meant to be a surprisingly encouraging word from Jesus. It's not just a try-harder mentality. It's saying, God can work through the smallest seed of faith in the face of the greatest difficulty to bring about a great obedience of faith to his great gospel of forgiveness.

[17 : 36] So Jesus talks about forgiveness, then faith, and then finally he goes on to faithfulness. Verse 7. Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping a sheep say to him when he comes in from the field, come at once and recline at table?

Will he not rather say to him, prepare supper for me and dress properly and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?

So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, we are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty. This is a really interesting parable Jesus tells.

It gives us a picture of the Christian life as a long obedience in the same direction, to quote Eugene Peterson, a lifelong obedience that faith in Christ produces and nourishes in us, and an obedience that is an expression of total personal devotion of the servant to the master.

You know, this imagery of servant master was already used twice in Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Luke, and in both those places, Jesus depicts himself as the one who serves. This is part of the reversal of the kingdom.

[19 : 02] We come into the kingdom thinking that my life is all about what I can do for Jesus, and actually we discover that it's all about what Jesus has done for me. And so Jesus, the first time, two times he uses this imagery in the Gospel of Luke, wants us to get, I am the master who has come to serve you, to save you, to do everything you need to be redeemed.

And yet here, Jesus turns the tables finally. He says, once you've gotten that point, I also want you to know that you are to serve me. And so Jesus first talks about his loving posture towards his disciples, and then he talks here about his disciples' loving posture towards their master.

And I think it's really important to be clear here. I do not think the main point is the fact that the servant obeys whenever he is asked, although that's really important.

I think the main point here is what is the posture of the servant to the master in their obedience and serving? Do you hear what I just said?

I don't think the point is just the fact that the servant obeys the master. I think what is the posture of the servant in their obedience and serving of the master? So the question is, why is the servant serving the master?

[20 : 19] What is motivating their service? What does the servant expect from the master in this relationship and for their work? And I think what the parable is doing is in a very subtle but direct way, Jesus is exposing that the posture of our hearts can be unhealthy even while we are serving Jesus.

We can be doing all the right things for all the wrong reasons. More succinctly, we can just serve Jesus for wrong reasons.

I think there are two wrong reasons that are highlighted here. The first comes in verse 7. Wrong reason number one, we can think our faithful service earns us the right to retire early.

We've served Jesus for an intense period of time. It was really difficult. We were incredibly faithful to him. The Lord did wonderful things. And now we feel like it's time to sit back, put up our feet, and just relax a little bit.

Verse 7. Will any one of you who is a servant, plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in the field, come at once and recline at table?

[21 : 30] Notice how Jesus is putting the hearers from the perspective of the master so that they have to enter into the internal posture of the master and consider what the master wants of a servant from inside.

And the image is of the servant's duties being cut short by the master before they're actually finished. The time that God has given us to serve him in this life is cut short prematurely for an early retirement and feast.

And so I think the first thing that Jesus points to is that we can sometimes come to the conclusion that our faithful service in one stage of life earns us the right to retire from serving Jesus in another stage of life.

Now there are just normal ways of aging in different stages of life and different energy levels and different health levels and different opportunities and limitations that are afforded for serving Jesus at any stage that we're in.

And sometimes all we can muster is just a silent prayer. And yet the point is is that in every stage from beginning to end we are fully devoted to the master.

[22 : 41] And the second wrong reason that is highlighted for us is that we can think faithful service deserves special recognition from Jesus. So, verse 9.

Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? God ought to thank us for our service. We did a favor for him.

The Greek word here is interestingly actually grace. It's not thank. It's does he have grace for his servant because he did what was commanded for him.

It's the same word that's used in chapter 1 when the angel announces to Mary, do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor or you have found grace with God. And I think the fatal idea in verse 9 is that God ought to show us grace and favor because of the way that we have served him.

So somehow because of the way we have served him God owes me something. Now some of you are looking at me and I can tell you're like I've never thought that in my life. But we have to ask the question how do we know that this is going on for us?

[23 : 57] And I think one of the ways that we know is that if we are serving the Lord or say we're serving in the church or we're doing something really faithful it's really difficult and takes a lot of our

time and energy and no one sees or acknowledges or thanks us for it do we get angry and bitter and resentful?

Or when something goes wrong in our life do we get angry at God because he did not have our back after we had served him for so many years? See there are really subtle ways in which this can actually be revealed in our lives that this is how we are operating that what we do makes God indebted to us in some way and this tends to lead us in one of two directions on the one hand either we're motivated to try harder and be noticed next time so we just lean in further for all the wrong reasons or on the other hand we are demotivated and we don't want to do it anymore so we give up for all the wrong reasons and so this is one of the things that can work its way into our common life together and become a very common experience for us and I want to say especially for those Christians that are very faithful and very seasoned this sneaky form of works righteousness where my value is in what I do and how I am perceived for others and what I do for the Lord is my source of value before the Lord it's a very subtle but sinister spiritual death trap serving Jesus becomes not just a free gift of offering and gratitude and love to him but it becomes about what I can get from him serving Jesus doesn't just become a humble expression of devotion to the master and delight in being able to serve at his behest but serving the master becomes about getting a reward and something from the master and so in a weird way the whole thing becomes transactional and not personal in this parable

I think Jesus is probing the posture of our hearts and saying why do we serve him and I think he's pointing us to the reality of the gospel that the work of faithfulness the life of service is itself a gift from the master it is not a means to grace but part of the grace that God gives us Ephesians chapter 2 for by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing it is the gift of God not as a result of works so that you may not boast for we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them notice what Paul is saying he's saying you have been saved by grace through faith not a result of works and yet part of God's saving of you is that he is making you a new creation and he has prepared good works for you to walk in and so the service that you have is actually part of the grace that God gives you in the kingdom and that's what motivates it is we receive the service that we have of the master as a gift and so our duty becomes a delight so these are the three words that Jesus takes us through in his church membership one-on-one class forgiveness faith and faithfulness three things that every church member needs to learn from Jesus let me remind you forgiveness there is no perfect church forgiveness is going to be required faith the call to forgiveness leads us to the cry of faith I don't have what it takes Lord and we discover that the greatness of the Lord must work through the smallness of our faith and bring about the obedience that he has asked of us and finally faithfulness faith in Christ will sustain a life of faithfulness to Christ where serving the master serving the savior is not a means to earn his favor but it is part of the loving kindness that he has given us I love this little collect for families at the very back of the little red book of common prayer in your pews there's a collect for families to say every morning goes like this we give you hearty thanks oh heavenly father for the rest of the past night and the gift of a new day grant that we may so pass its hours in the perfect freedom of your service that at evening tide we may again give thanks unto you through Jesus Christ our Lord amen I and continue to t and grab